



CHAPTER 1

7:30 A.M., *Paisley Bakery and Café,*
Kearney Street, San Francisco, California

A tingle shot through Paisley Nichols when she glanced up from the cash register and saw a tall man get into line. She recognized him because he was one of her regular customers, but also because he was strikingly handsome. Their gazes met, nothing out of the ordinary, just an accidental contact that was easy to pretend hadn't happened. She flashed a smile at him even though the morning rush was full-on and there wasn't time for flirting, not even if she had the nerve.

Weekday mornings were a madhouse, and anytime she was needed out front, well, she liked to think of the madness as a delightful way to make the rent on her hole-in-the-wall space. The tables were packed, and the line of hungry patrons stopping by on their way to work reached almost to the door. She worked the counter every morning

to keep that line moving. Knowing the regulars helped a lot with that. By the time the regulars got to the counter, all they had to do was hand over their money, exchange a smile or a quick “good morning” and head off with their coffee and pastries. She prepped the hot guy’s croissant and café au lait with three turbinado sugars while he tapped away at a cell phone.

She wondered if her interest in him meant she was ready to date again after her disaster of a relationship with Urban. The disaster part wasn’t all Urban’s fault; she was mature enough to acknowledge that. He’d met her mother—her tarot-card-reading, astrology-believing, psychic lunatic of a mother—and that only sped up the race to relationship death. She’d taken herself out of circulation for a long time after the crash. If she was ready to date again, this lovely, sexy man might be just the place to start.

He was handsome in a moneyed, elegant way that was subverted by long white-blond hair done up in dozens of braids with tiny red beads polished to a shine. The beads clicked when he moved his head. Very sexy. Today’s suit was tailored, like all the others she’d seen him in. This one was a midnight-blue wool that turned his eyes an even more startling blue. His shirt was pristine white cotton with sharp collar points, his tie burnt-orange silk. An exquisite dresser. And then those beaded braids that worked with such ridiculous sex appeal. He didn’t wear a wedding ring; that was something she’d noticed.

The line moved quickly because she had a lot of regulars now. The Financial District had discovered her, thank goodness. Paisley Bakery and Café was now a popular morning stop for people on their way to work. She got a lot of lunchtime traffic, too, plus a respectable number

of orders for employee birthday cakes and lunch-meeting treats. Her catering business was picking up as well. Over the last three months, she'd had money left over after rent, payroll, insurance, and her loan. Profit.

The first dollar she'd made when the doors opened was framed on the wall behind the cash register. Whenever she looked at it, she just had to grin. This was her dream, and she was not only living it but was succeeding at it, too.

Today marked the fifth week of the man with blond braids coming into the café. He was three people from the front now, and she gave him a surreptitious once-over. He was watching her. Busted. She gave him a quick smile.

He smiled back.

Paisley smoothed her white chef's jacket and wished it was a little cleaner. A smear of chocolate ganache arced across one shoulder of the jacket. Occupational hazards of the bakery business included chocolate on your clothes and going home smelling like butter and vanilla.

"Good morning!" she said when he made it to the front of the line. She smiled, not too hard, and made eye contact.

"Good morning." He had a faint accent she couldn't quite place, but boy was his voice dreamy. She handed over his items, took his money, made change, and that was it. He hesitated, then said, "Thank you," in that faint and yummy accent before leaving with his coffee and croissant.

Rats.

Then she was on to the next customer with no time to think about her disappointment until after nine-thirty, and then it was time to start another bake and do the prep for the lunch crowd.

She was out front for lunchtime, and toward the end of the rush, he came back. Her heart leaped even while

she told herself this meant nothing. She waved off the clerk and stepped up to the counter herself. He studied the various pastries and baked goods behind the glass display counter. Brownies, cupcakes, cookies, and pastries left over from the morning bake, as well as samples of the various cakes she sold, either whole or by the slice.

The beads in his hair didn't look like plastic. A few of them were faceted in a beveled setting the color of rose-gold, but most of them were milky smooth. "Can I help you?"

He looked up and when their gazes met, she got a major rush of *whoa*. Her mother, if she had been here instead of in Georgia and if Paisley been crazy enough to tell her about the reaction, would have said it was fate. And then intone that fate came in three flavors: bad, worse, and disastrous. Her mother was a real ray of sunshine. Paisley had spent years trying to get out from under the habit of seeing doom everywhere.

"I would like to buy a cake."

There was no doom involved in a hottie who wanted to buy a cake from her. However, there was profit. And the possibility of a date, because if he showed the least sign of interest, she was going to ask him out to coffee.

"You're in the right place." She answered his questions about her ready-made cakes, how many they served and whether they could be personalized. But of course they could be personalized, she told him. He made his selection—a chocolate butter cake with a chocolate frosting decorated with white pastilles and white fondant daisies—and she took the cake in the back to pipe out the phrase *Congratulations on Your Success* on top of it.

At least he wasn't having her write *To my lovely wife* on the thing.

She brought it out, showed it to him, and he smiled his approval. What a smile, too. Serious with an edge of heat. That smile made her think her lack of a sex life needed to be remedied ASAP. As she boxed up the cake, she worked up her courage and said, "I'm Paisley Nichols. The owner and principal baker of this establishment."

His eyes jittered, which startled her enough that there was a brief and awkward silence. He closed his eyes for a moment, but she could see his eyeballs twitching underneath his eyelids. When he opened them again, everything was back to normal. "Yes," he said. "I know you are the Paisley of Paisley Bakery and Café."

He did? Did that mean he'd been noticing her the way she'd been noticing him? Mentally, she tried out a few more ways to ask him to coffee without sounding like she was actually asking him out. She taped a set of instructions for storing and serving the cake to the top of the box, wrapped it up with her murderously expensive paisley ribbon, slapped on a gold foiled sticker with the name, address, and phone number of her bakery on it, and set the box on the counter. All her prices included tax. "Twenty-five fifty."

"I am Rasmus Kessler." He said his name the way people did when they came from a country where they didn't speak English. He took a hundred-dollar bill from a slim wallet and handed it to her.

She grimaced at the bill. "I can't break a hundred." She could, but she was under strict orders from her accountant never to take bills larger than a twenty. Too much counterfeiting going on.

"Of course," he said smoothly. He returned the hundred and took out two twenties.

“Thanks.” When she gave him his change, she steeled her nerve for her invitation to coffee. As she took the bills, the tips of his first two fingers touched her right wrist, and she got an electric shock. She laughed and shook her hand.

His eyes widened. They jittered again. “Are you all right?”

“Sure.” Except her wrist burned where the static electricity had sparked off her skin. She handed him his change. “Enjoy your cake, Mr. Kessler.”

“Rasmus, please.” He picked up the box and stood there silently. Watching her.

Dang it, her wrist hurt. Enough that she had to concentrate on not crying. “Can I get you a coffee for the road?” Was that lame or what? But she felt like she was talking past a steel plate between her and the outside world. Inside, pain crawled into her head.

“Yes, thank you,” he said. “That would be nice.”

She made him his usual café au lait, remembered the three packets of turbinado sugar he liked, stirred the contents, and handed it over. The pain leveled out, but her wrist still hurt and her arm trembled as she held out the paper cup. “On the house, Rasmus.”

He took the cup. She flinched to avoid him touching her again, which ended up being awkward. “Thank you again.” He hesitated. “Perhaps I can buy you a coffee sometime soon.”

“I’d like that.”

“Friday evening?”

She nodded.

“Where should I pick you up?” Rasmus asked.

“Here.” She pasted on a grin. “I should be done about five.”

He gave her his cell number so she could call him in case something came up, and she watched him leave the shop with his cake and his coffee. The near certainty of her first date in ten months floated around her. She was practically giddy. Coffee wasn't a date, of course. Coffee meant you could bail if you found out he liked the Dodgers when this was a Giants town, or hated kids when you wanted a big family. Coffee was when you decided whether to never meet again or give a guy your cell number.

She'd have been more enthused about the uptick in her social life, except her wrist hurt like the devil. After he was gone, she pushed up her sleeve to take a look. A blister the exact size and roundness of a quarter had formed on the inside of her wrist.

Whoever heard of static electricity giving you a blister? She went into the back room and got out the first-aid kit. Burns were an occupational hazard in a kitchen, so she had the salve and bandages to wrap up the injury. A little later she popped a couple of aspirin for the pain in her wrist and the throbbing headache that went with it.

At home that afternoon, she replaced the dressing. The blister had popped, but another one looked to be forming where the first had burst. Her wrist hurt worse than ever, though the injury didn't look like it was getting infected. She half expected to see a red line heading up her arm. She felt crappy enough to have blood poisoning. The pain wasn't limited to her wrist anymore. Her entire arm ached all the way to her shoulder. Enough to make her sick to her stomach. She skipped dinner and sat on her cheap sofa with a cup of hot tea in her left hand because she was having trouble using her right arm.

She was sweating, too, and seeing double. Her head

felt like it was in a vise. The pain crawled around inside her skull and took over. A voice in the back of her mind said she needed to get to the hospital. Unfortunately, she didn't have health insurance. If she went to the ER, the bills would bankrupt her. Besides, who went to the hospital for a blister?

Sometime between coming home and sitting down, she'd gotten too weak to move. She put down her tea before she dropped it. Maybe the blister wasn't the problem. She staggered to her feet, intending to find her cell phone and call 911, because dead would be worse than medical bills she couldn't pay. She'd never been this sick in her life, and the really scary thing was that she was too sick to be properly afraid. Meningitis, she remembered reading somewhere, came on quickly, and it made you feel a lot like she felt right now. Killer headache. High fever. Stiff neck and joints. Meningitis was deadly.

The way she felt, she wasn't going to live long enough to have a date with anyone. *Fate*. She thought back to that moment of *whoa* when she and Rasmus Kessler locked gazes. Apparently, her fate was the disastrous kind.

Her phone was on the kitchen counter next to her purse. She lurched in that direction, but she saw three phones there. All of them looked real to her. She was shaking too hard to see straight, and the pressure in her head was unrelenting. Her stomach had other ideas about what to do next. She barely made it to the bathroom before she threw up. The first time. Every time she thought she could make it to her phone, she heaved again. Her stomach turned itself inside out until there was nothing left and still it didn't stop.

She could barely move. Her skin was hot enough to fry

an egg, her ears were ringing, and every joint in her body hurt.

The pain gripped her like a wild animal and refused to let go. It spread through her until she could no longer identify the source. She was nothing but agony. In the back of her barely functioning brain, she knew only one thing for certain: *If she didn't get to the phone to call for help, she wasn't going to make it.*